# Sign Off for 'Newsroom'?

Final discussions on whether WETA's showpiece news program, "Newsroom," will continue or be killed after two years of sometimes stormy existance were under way yesterday.

Channel 26's most money- and-space-consuming program (it costs $1.25 million a year, and its set permanently dominates the main studio), "Newsroom" operates under a Ford Foundation grant which ends on Nov. 30.

The station has applied for an extension of the grant, but cannot afford to keep the program if Ford does not renew, and has promised to let the staff know by Oct. 1. A warning to staff members has already sent many of them looking for other jobs.

Other, less ambitious news programs have been outlined to fill the gap "Newsroom" would leave in Washington's only educational television station's local news coverage.

These would probably be in the cheaper and less complicated format of studio interviews and discussions, without much use of film or firsthand coverage of events.

"Newsroom," in its effort to develop a viable public television alternative to commercial newscasting, has had three editors and several format changes since it went on the air on March 23, 1970. The dismissal of the first editor, William J. Woestendiek, stirred controversy when it was stated as a reason that Woestendiek's wife had taken a job as the press secretary for the Attorney General's wife, Martha Mitchell. In spite of protests of anti-Republican bias and of negation of job independence of husband and wife, the firing was upheld.

The second editor was Ben Gilbert, formerly an editor with The Washington Post and now assistant to the President of WETA. The present editor is Victor W. Maerki, a former newspaperman and television newsman.

During this time, the program has exhibited an increasingly local thrust, and there has been more effort to use film and other graphics. Last May, it was cut back from an hour to half an hour over the protests of Maerki. "They (station management) kept saying half an hour would be snappier than an hour, and I kept saying that half an hour is just shorter than an hour," he said yesterday.

*—Judith Martin*